CIVIL SERVANT

FOR NURSE EUNICE RIVERS

I could perform my job no other way:
obey instructions or be dismissed,
which would end my nursing career.
I was a Colored nurse,
special, one of few.
I didn't question the authority
the government doctors exercised over me.
Their control of life and death
and my sense of duty and responsibility
were parallel and reciprocating.
My father, Tuskegee Institute, and Dr. Dibble
had trained me to obey
the instructions of white men,
and all men.
I didn't talk back,
raise my voice in protest,
or demand the doctors save the men.
It wasn't my place to diagnose,
prescribe, or agitate.

When the doctors told me
to prevent the men
from getting treatment elsewhere,
I did. I supplied their names
to all county health officials.
They agreed to withhold treatment
even after penicillin was discovered
to be an effective cure for bad blood.

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The government doctors
viewed the men
as syphilis experiments.
I troubled myself
to remember their names.
I visited their homes
between annual checkups
to listen to their hearts
and feel their pulses.
They had aches and pains
and complaints too numerous to name,
but I soothed them. I tried.
I gave them spring tonic
for their blood.
I couldn't give them medicine.
I tried to care for everyone
including the women,
the old folks, and children.
I became an adopted member
of many of the families I visited.
I ate at their tables,
sat at their sickbeds,
mourned at their funerals.
I married one of their sons.

I never thought my duty
damned the men.
They were sick with bad blood,
but I thought they were lucky.
Most Colored folks in Macon
went from cradle to grave
without ever visiting a doctor.
The ones with bad blood were envied
because they received free